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Records of Black-breasted Parrotbill *Paradoxornis flavirostris* from Manas National Park, Assam, in north-east India

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The Black-breasted Parrotbill *Paradoxornis flavirostris* is a globally threatened bird and is listed as 'Vulnerable' owing to a small population, inferred to be declining rapidly as a result of extensive loss and degradation of grasslands (BirdLife International 2009). It is also a 'restricted range' species (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998). Its known historic range was restricted to the plains of the Brahmaputra and Barak Rivers in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and northern West Bengal in India and north-eastern Bangladesh (BirdLife International 2001). Recent records come from a handful of sites only: Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary, northern West Bengal (BirdLife International 2001), Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, Assam (Choudhury 1994), D'Ering Memorial Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh (Singh 1999) and Kaziranga National Park, Assam (BirdLife International 2001).

The occurrence of Black-breasted Parrotbill in Manas National Park was not reported in BirdLife International (2001, 2009). However, Choudhury (2006) reported a secondary record of two birds seen in 1997, south of Mathanguri (Bibhuti Lahkar, pers. comm.). I here report recent observations on the species from Manas National Park in western Assam (Figure 1).

On 26 May 2007, while negotiating tall elephant grass jungle on the banks of a shallow river formed by the Doimari and Rabang nullahs, in the Bhuyanpara Range area of Manas National Park, I heard the call of Black-breasted Parrotbill at 16h55 (c. 26°45'N 91°04'E). The site was west of Kanchanbari Forest Camp and south-west of Makhibaha Forest Camp. Since I was familiar with its distinctive call (heard in Dibru-Saikhowa National Park), it took no

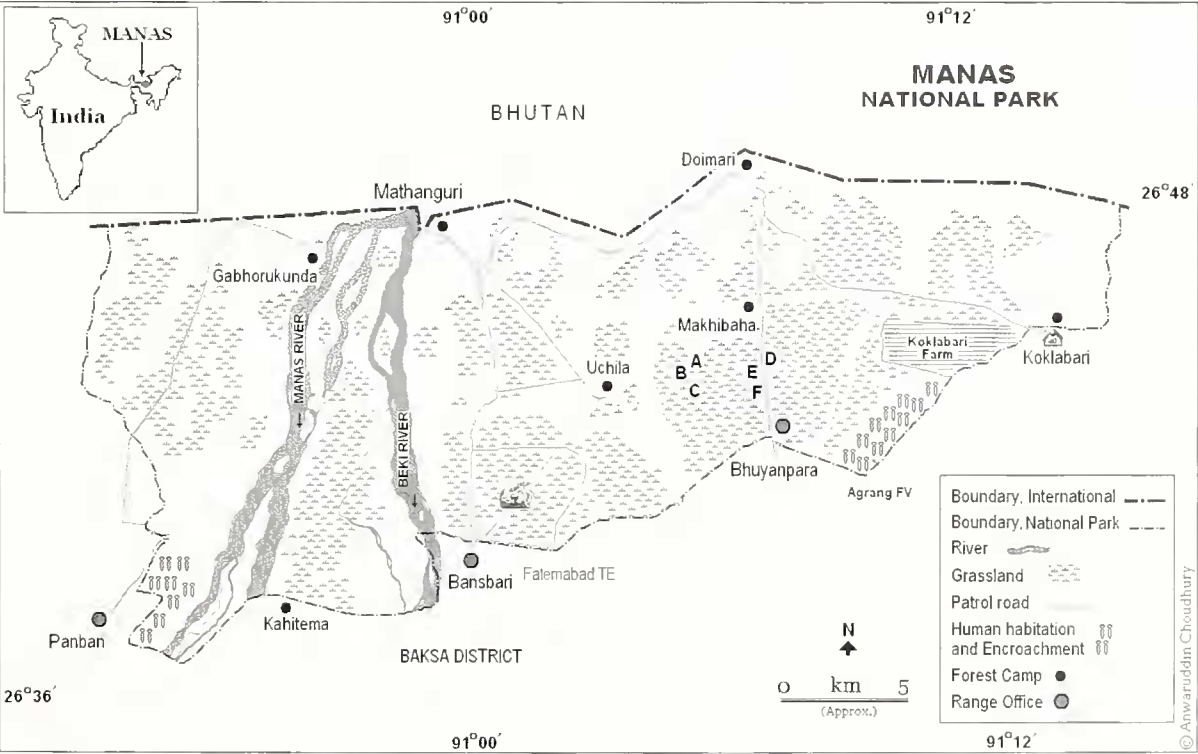


Figure 1. Map of Manas National Park showing the sites of observation of Black-breasted Parrotbill (marked A, B, C, D, E, F).

time for me to identify the source of the call. I took the riding elephant to near the call, where one bird was seen. Its large, thick, parrot-like bill, black patches on head-sides and throat and the extensive black area on its upper breast were conspicuous. The rest of its body was uniform brownish-rufous. I spent 15 minutes in the area and could see 4–6 birds on the left bank of the shallow, 50 m wide river. I obtained video footage for a few minutes. I also played back the prerecorded call (kindly given by Desmond Allen) and at least one bird responded and came nearby twice. At around 17h10, while still observing this group, another group started calling from the opposite bank of the river, c. 150 m from the first group. With the help of a pair of binoculars, I could see two birds and a lot of grass movement, indicating the presence of more birds. While returning after these observations, one more group was encountered c. 1 km south of the first group, on the right bank of the river at around 17h30. This group could not be seen as they stopped calling when we were close and possible rain forced us to rush for the range headquarters. These sites are marked respectively A, B and C on the map (Fig. 1). That particular day was extraordinary for grassland birds, as on a three-hour elephant ride I observed six (possibly seven) threatened and two Near Threatened birds in the area (Choudhury 2007).

On 15 November 2009, while mist-netting for the elusive Manipur Bush Quail *Perdica manipurensis*, also in the Bhuyanpara Range area of Manas National Park but in a easterly location near Kanchanbari Forest Camp, I heard calls to the east at around 09h30 (c. 26°45'N 91°06'E). There were several birds (at least three as surmised from their calls). After a short while, another group started calling from the south. These sites are marked D and E on the map (Figure 1).

On 3 April 2010, I again visited the site on the banks of the same river (formed by the Doimari and Rabang nullahs). To my utter surprise I found that the habitat had changed: the *Arundo donax* has been replaced by *Sachharum spontaneum* and the riverbed had become dry. This was because of a natural diversion of the river towards the east. At Kanchanbari Forest Camp there was no sign of the parrotbills as the entire grassland had been burnt as part of the park's management. There was no suitable habitat in the form of tall grass at that time in the area. However, while returning to

Bhuyanpara, I heard a call from a small patch of tall grass at 17h15 (c. 26°44'N 91°06'E) (marked F on the map; Figure 1).

The sites where the parrotbills were seen and heard were dominated by *Arundo donax* grass. During January–February every year, the bulk of the grassland is burnt as part of the park's management, and the parrotbills vanish temporarily from these sites. This must be a major limiting factor for the species and I have requested that the local ranger burns the grass in patches so that areas dominated by such reeds may be left out.

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# Acrobatic copulatory display in the Black-crowned Barwing *Actinodura sodangorum*

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The Black-crowned Barwing *Actinodura sodangorum* is a recently described species of babbler from the highlands of central Annam, Vietnam (Eames *et al.* 1999), and is currently listed as IUCN Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2011). On 27 April 2008 JdH, Uthai Treesucon and a local Vietnamese guide tape-lured a pair of Black-crowned Barwings at Loxo Pass, Annam, Vietnam, 15.187175°N 107.74601°E, elevation c. 1,000 m, in scrubby roadside vegetation amidst a mosaic of farmland and secondary woodlots. The first response was from the presumed male (hereafter 'male'), who came into the open and replied to the taped song with his own rendition of it, a mellow whistled *wididididi-dyüüüürrr-dyuuuurr*. Soon he was joined by a presumed female (hereafter 'female'), and the pair then hopped and flew about together, in and out of view, at the edges of dense low vegetation.

The taped song was only played a couple of times initially, to stimulate a response from the birds in the wild, but after their first appearance nearby the pair continued to react to the now silent 'intruder' not in an overtly aggressive way but rather with behaviours which presumably reinforced the bond between them. They moved together between small branches in the shrubbery, perching close to or up against each other, the male frequently raising his crest and

half-fanning his wings and tail (in the manner of a fantail), the female remaining sleeker, never raising her crest and less frequently opening her wings, but often leaning steeply forward over her perch, sometimes with tail raised, as if ready to drop to a lower position. At the same time, both birds briefly and very rapidly preened, allopreened and pecked lightly at each other, changing position with each other in an animated (but not agitated) fashion, the male once hopping over his mate in a leap-frog that involved landing for a split-second on her back.

In one sequence of this behaviour the pair apparently copulated, or almost copulated, in a fast, intricate movement that involved both birds swinging in a full circle around a branch. The sequence began with the female pecking at the male, who then swung head-first below the perch and came up on the other side of her in a smooth, rapid movement. Then immediately both birds swung head-first below the perch and up again, this time rather more haltingly, with the female slightly ahead of the male, both birds twisting their upperparts away from each other so that their tail-bases briefly crossed and apparently touched, possibly with cloacal contact, in the course of the downward manoeuvre. The female (her momentum